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Strand 1: Intercultural Education – Multicultural Education – Diversity Education: Theoretical and Reflective Perspectives

Diversity and Social Cohesion *

Abstract

In the last few years there has been a growing tendency on the part of some social sciences researchers to adopt a broad definition of diversity (including, for instance, not only cultural values, but also gender, age, socio-economic status, and sexual orientation) and to use this term as a synonym of “the other”, the non-ego. This fact has been particularly helpful both from an epistemological and an educational point of view. The relationship with diversity is a basic and continuous aspect of human experience, as the self develops through its relations with others. Thus, the meaning and the “management” of diversity are closely associated with issues like social cohesion, social and political conflict, and social/educational interventions aiming to foster social cohesion.

A positive and real social cohesion in an ingroup rests on the acknowledgment of and the dialogue with the diversities of the various members of the ingroup itself, which inevitably results in the ingroup members’ becoming familiar with and getting used to diversity in general. This means that diversity relating to the outgroup and to the various members of the outgroup is understood and accepted, given that diversity among the members of the ingroup is also understood and accepted. This way, cross-cultural relations within an ingroup and between the ingroup and the outgroups are fostered. That is to say, social cohesion within the ingroup is automatically extended

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and generalized to the relations with outgroups, which contradicts some traditional assumptions in social psychology research according to which social cohesion in the ingroup is accompanied by its hostility toward the outgroup.

It goes without saying that not all kinds of diversities should be accepted. All diversities should be analyzed and evaluated, which means that some diversities can be accepted, while others should be rejected (like, for example, the diversity of a Nazi). Indeed, social cohesion should be grounded in what we might define as a “well reasoned analysis of diversities”.

At the psychological level, human beings’ education must be fundamentally based on the awareness that at any given time the self, far from being immutable, is an entity which needs to be understood and, in case, modified as a result both of the continuous contact with others, who are inevitably diverse, and of the analysis and understanding of this contact.

One of the most significant results of a research study we conducted in Italian state schools on youths’ (aged 15-19) attitudes toward multiculturalism with the use of focus groups was the realization that most of our participants have lost or have never even experienced a feeling of general social cohesion (at the level of the nation, home town, or community at large), this fact being especially related to their lost confidence on public institutions and especially on political institutions. Their view can be very synthetically summarized in some participants’ phrases, like “the law is wrong, the whole system is wrong”, “there is no control, no security service”, “the Italian state is weak”, “politicians are Mafiosi”, “where is justice?”, and “political parties are not reliable”.

Besides, our data indicate that not only participants’ perception of social cohesion is non-existent or is only very partially existent, but also social cohesion itself is actually non-existent or is only very partially existent, since a real social cohesion in a group implies on the part of the members of the group a good knowledge of the various aspects of the group itself. Instead, participants’ views were often characterized by a certain degree of misinformation regarding significant aspects of present Italian social reality. Frequent examples of misinformation were, for instance, the sometimes contradictory beliefs that all Italians are unable to make both ends meet, that immigrants receive a lot of money from the Italian state when they arrive in Italy, that immigrants who commit a crime very easily get away with it while Italians are severely punished and are put in jail for less serious wrongs, and that jails are nice places to live in.

Our participants’ discussions also indicated that insecurity and lack of general social cohesion create fear and that fear can provoke aggression. Vehement exclamations against immigrants, who

are frequently perceived as dangerous criminals, pronounced by some of these youths, like “Get back to your bloody country!” or “A curse on those that made you come here!” clearly express hate and resentment. In most cases during the focus groups these same participants expressed sincere interest and even empathy toward their immigrant classmates when they were telling the stories of their arrival in Italy and of their previous hard life in their countries of origin. This means that at school level or, at least, at class level, positive cross-cultural contact has been created and social cohesion has been built. This also means that in their work teachers should always provide concrete examples of social cohesion and, what is more, should try to enable their students to become aware of their contradictory views when dealing with the problems of immigrants in general and when dealing with the problems of their specific immigrant classmates. Finally, the adoption of a broad concept of diversity also on the part of teachers can boost their efforts to improve their pupils’ cross-cultural relations, as teachers are aware that at the same time their efforts can also improve their pupils’ relations with other kinds of diversities since from a psychological point of view the logical structure of that complex process which is constituted by the understanding of diversities is always the same.

In this paper I will address the themes of diversity and social cohesion with special reference to youths' experiences and the role of education. I will deal with diversity and social cohesion both as separate and interrelated entities. In my discussion I will also provide some theoretical considerations which can challenge the validity of some traditional basic assumptions in social psychology especially regarding the relationships between the ingroup and outgroups. Moreover, as an exemplar, I will focus on the significance of specific educational interventions that schools can carry out in order to foster pupils' positive attitudes toward diversity and a real social cohesion at school and in the outside world. Some of these points will also be illustrated through data drawn on a research study we conducted with the use of focus groups in Italian state schools on youths' (aged 15-19) attitudes toward multiculturalism.

Diversity within a new perspective

In the last few years, especially as a result of Robustelli and the present author's theoretical contributions (e.g., Robustelli, 2000; Pagani & Robustelli, 2005; Pagani & Robustelli, 2010; Pagani, 2011a, 2011b; Pagani, Robustelli, & Martinelli, 2009; Pagani, Robustelli, & Martinelli, in press), there has been a growing tendency in the social sciences to adopt a broad definition of diversity. In particular, our definition includes, for instance, not only cultural values, but also socio-economic status, gender, age, sexual orientation, species, and the "otherness" in general as a distinctive element characterizing each individual and even the same individual in different periods and moments in her/his life. In sum, we use the term "diversity" as a synonym of "the other", the non-ego. As a matter of fact, in social psychology there is no research area named "Diversity studies", embracing a wide, comprehensive and deep range of meanings as the one characterizing the concept of diversity we have elaborated.

This new conceptualization has been particularly helpful both from an epistemological and an educational point of view. The relationship with diversity is a basic and continuous aspect of human experience, as the self develops through its relations with others (Pagani, 2011b; Robustelli, 2000). Obviously, the meaning and the "management" of diversity are closely associated with issues like social cohesion, social and political conflict, and social/educational interventions aiming to foster social cohesion.

What is more, this broad conceptualization of the term “diversity” consequentially bears on other conceptualizations that have been elaborated in social psychology, like, for example, those regarding the relationships between the ingroup and outgroups.

In this paper my basic assumption is that a real social cohesion in the ingroup, which clearly rests on the acknowledgement of and the dialogue with the various diversities of the specific members of the ingroup, unavoidably fosters the understanding of the various diversities pertaining both to the outgroups in general and to the specific members of the outgroups themselves. In other words, diversity, like for example cultural diversity, relating to the outgroup and to its various members, is understood and accepted, given that diversity among the members of the ingroup is also understood and accepted. That is to say, a real social cohesion within the ingroup can be automatically extended and generalized to the relations with outgroups, which contradicts some traditional assumptions in social psychology research according to which social cohesion in the ingroup is often accompanied by its hostility or indifference toward the outgroup (e.g., Brewer, 1999).

This contradiction can be partly explained by the specific characteristics of the groups whose interactions are under scrutiny. In a recent paper, where they maintain that individuals who are socially connected are more likely to feel disconnected from more socially distant others, Waytz and Epley (2012) mention military units and athletic teams as two examples of “the most tightly-knit groups” (p. 75). It is clear that in these cases the affective bonds uniting the members of these groups can be very different from those characterizing other groups, like families or groups of friends. Groups can be very different. Their members’ reciprocal links, interactions, affective bonds, and diversities can vary in quantity, quality, depth and complexity. For example, it is possible that in a military unit or in an athletic team members are less interested in the subtle and deep psychological diversities characterizing each member and are more interested in a few specific aspects of members’ personalities and histories and more involved in an effort to develop a common identity and attain common goals. Besides, there are some groups, and military units or athletic teams are certainly among them, who are by their very nature particularly attuned to constantly assuming a competitive attitude towards outgroups. Research studies indicate that categorizing people into different groups, even when the criterion that has been used for the differentiation is weak or even artificial, is alone sufficient to elicit ingroup favoritism (e.g., Lonsdale & North, 2009; Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971). This can be explained by the influence of the competitive life pattern that is now prevailing the world over and which in various ways affects people’s feelings and behavior (Pagani & Robustelli, 1998; 2005; 2010; 2011;

Robustelli, 2007; Robustelli & Pagani, 1996), whereby most people usually tend to view others as rivals, competitors, or even enemies who try to overpower them and whom, in their turn, they may try to overpower. Thus, the cause of ingroup favoritism should be related to people's competitive attitude and not to their mere belonging to a particular group. The mere belonging to a group *per se* should not produce any negative attitude toward an outgroup. It is my opinion that these issues should be taken into greater consideration by social and cognitive psychologists.

Finally, there is another important point in Waytz and Epley's paper that is worth considering here. In order to support their thesis whereby people who are socially connected are more likely to feel disconnected from more socially distant others, they maintain that these people are less motivated to establish new relationships "with the minds of *additional* others" (p. 74), as if social connection had satiated their motivation to feel connected with more distant individuals, and had exhausted their capacity to renew the effort they have made in attaining their satisfactory condition of social connection. These authors' point of view needs a brief comment, as it bears on my theoretical considerations regarding the issues of diversity and social cohesion and the relationships between ingroup and outgroup. Suffice it to state here that there are certainly many cases in which people who are closely connected with some other people, whose diversities they know and, according to cases, respect, are interested in and even love, need to repeat this satisfactory experience and enlarge it to more distant groups, thus creating a larger and deeper social cohesion. Thus, the motivation to establish new social connections, far from being reduced, can even be stronger.

The role of diversity in interpersonal, including cross-cultural, relations

Diversity creates complexity and fosters individuals' cognitive and emotional skills. Diversity can produce conflict, but the conflict can bear a huge potential for a real interpersonal understanding and social cohesion. It goes without saying that not all kinds of diversities should be accepted. All diversities should be analyzed and evaluated, which means that some diversities can be accepted, while others should be rejected (like, for example, the diversity of a Nazi). Indeed, social cohesion should be grounded in what we might define as a "well reasoned analysis of diversities". It should also be clear that, to the extent that a specific diversity is accepted, also the rights of this diversity should be acknowledged.

At the psychological level, human beings' education must be fundamentally based on the awareness that at any given time the self, far from being immutable, is an entity which needs to be understood and, in case, modified as a result both of the continuous contact with others, who are inevitably diverse, and of the analysis and understanding of this contact.

Social cohesion is a link that keeps the members of a group together. It helps them to attain their goals more easily. Cohesion is strengthened by the sharing of these goals and by positive relationships among the members of the group. This does not mean that members' points of view must be identical, because this situation would weaken members' cognitive and emotional skills. Members instead should agree on their possibility of expressing their different points of view, of discussing them and of reaching an agreement on the conclusions. Hence, cohesion should not be confused with uniformity. A real cohesion is almost always grounded in points of view that are, at least in part, different and that, through respectful and empathic confrontation, merge into a common point of view. Thus diversity and cohesion are the starting point and the finishing point of a process than can be defined of social rationality. Obviously, these two concepts are particularly significant when we address the problem of cross-cultural relations.

Educators should be deeply aware of the cognitive and emotional meaning of diversity as well as of its continuous action in human development. This way they could better help youths to develop those "sophisticated cognitive abilities", that Norma Feschbach (1996, p. 78) considers so important in order to address situations empathically. School in particular could help youths become familiar with, and even expert in, diversity and complexity. In this task school should be capable of opposing those styles and models that are proposed by marketing, advertising, sports fans, racist associations, and most of political propaganda. This way children and adolescents might become less violent and more empathic, less suggestible and less uncritical, less conditioned by the ideology of the herd, less dependent on fashions, on stereotypes and on prejudices, less insecure, less lonely when they feel troubled, as they are more capable of analyzing their own self and others' self, of communicating with others within a network of relationships among people who are diverse, each with her/his specific individuality.

It is clear that teachers' adoption of a broad concept of diversity and their awareness of the special role of diversity in human development can boost their efforts to improve their pupils' cross-cultural relations, as teachers are aware that at the same time their efforts can also improve their pupils' relations with other kinds of diversities, since from a psychological point of view the

logical structure of that complex process which is constituted by the understanding of diversities is always the same (Pagani & Robustelli, 2005; 2010; Robustelli, 2002).

Some results of a research study in Italian state schools

We conducted five focus groups with small groups of youngsters (about 10 participants each group, both males and females, aged 15-19, from 3 state schools in Central Italy, one in Rome and two in two different small towns). The aim of this study was to analyze the attitudes toward multiculturalism of native-born and immigrant youths¹ and to identify some of the basic cognitive and emotional processes associated with youths' racist attitudes. Participation in the research was presented as part of the school curriculum. Each pupil was identified only by a letter of the alphabet that was randomly assigned and by gender. Their age was inferred from the grades they were attending, as participants were randomly selected from different grades. The interviews were conducted by the author with the collaboration of a research assistant and were audiotaped and successively transcribed. The interviews were independently examined by the author and two research assistants, who conducted a qualitative and quantitative analysis of the transcripts and, successively, discussed the results of their analyses. The methodology used was largely based on principles of textual analysis, discourse analysis, ethnographic analysis, and content analysis (Brown & Yule, 1983; Losito, 1993; Silverman, 1993; Stubbs, 1983). We aimed to understand, whenever possible, both the implicit and the explicit, meaning of the texts (Babbie, 2001; Harker & Bates, 2007).

Here I will comment only on those data that more specifically relate to the themes of diversity and social cohesion.

One of the most significant results of this research study was the realization that most of our participants have lost or have never even experienced a feeling of general social cohesion (at the level of the nation, home town, or community at large), this fact being especially related to their lost confidence on public institutions and especially on political institutions. Below are some pupils' phrases that can summarize their views on this point. It is important to bear in mind that all these comments were made in the context of participants' debating on the issues of multiculturalism and immigration and that the pupils were also criticizing the Italian government' lax measures as regards the problem of immigration in our country:

“The law is wrong, the whole system is wrong.”, “There is no control, no security service.”, “The Italian state is weak.”, “Politicians are Mafiosi.”, “Half of our politicians are tax dodgers.”, “They [politicians] have the whip hand, we can do nothing [...]. In the end we count for nothing, we must only work.”, “Where is justice?”, “Political parties are not reliable.”, “It is the Italian state that does not work.” (repeated three times in the space of two minutes), “If I want to rebel, who can I speak to? To nobody.”, “They [some immigrants] come to Italy because here laws are less severe ... in their country laws are more severe and they don’t like that. So, why do they come here? Because here they are not punished, they have never been punished.”, “Italian jails are hotels, not jails, three-star hotels, they eat, drink, laugh, and have fun.”², “If you are an immigrant and you are caught, they repatriate you at the most, that’s all they will do.”, “But they do not even repatriate them.”³, “Then they come back here illegally, this is the problem, they do whatever they like, this is the Italian law.”, “They [some immigrants] tried to break into my home eight times, last time they did it, [...] we reported it to the police again and again, we are pissed off.”

Our data also indicate that not only participants’ perception of social cohesion, at least at the level of the nation, home town, or community at large, is non-existent or is only very partially existent, but also social cohesion itself is actually non-existent or is only very partially existent, since a real social cohesion in a group at least implies on the part of the members of the group a good knowledge of the various aspects of the group itself. Instead, participants’ views were often characterized by a certain degree of misinformation regarding significant aspects of present Italian social reality. Frequent examples of misinformation were, for instance, the sometimes contradictory beliefs that all Italians are unable to make both ends meet, that all politicians are Mafiosi, that immigrants receive a lot of money from the Italian state when they arrive in Italy or, in any case, are granted privileges, which is regarded by a few participants as one of the main causes of social and economic problems in Italy, that some immigrants are criminals just because they arrived here illegally, that immigrants who commit a crime very easily get away with it while Italians are severely punished and are put in jail for less serious wrongs, that jails are nice places to live in, that Muslims have requested that the crucifix should be removed from schools, and that 100% of Italians are Christian.

Our participants’ discussions also indicated that insecurity and lack of general social cohesion create fear and that fear can provoke aggression. Vehement exclamations against immigrants, pronounced by some of these youths, like *“Get back to your bloody country!”*, *“Now, that’s enough!”* (repeated by the same pupil three times in the space of thirty seconds with reference to the

arrival of new immigrants) or “*A curse on those that made you come here!*”, clearly express hate and resentment. Lack of social cohesion thwarts knowledge and understanding, thus contributing to the perception of threat and, in particular, to the perception of unjustified or partly justified threat, a kind of perception that is usually related to prejudices (Pagani, 2010; Pagani, 2011a; Pagani & Robustelli, 2010; Pagani & Robustelli, 2011).

However, like other studies we have previously conducted (e.g., Pagani & Robustelli, 2005; Pagani & Robustelli, 2010), this study clearly indicates the presence of a notable contradiction in many of those youths that explicitly and often vehemently expressed their opposition to immigrants and their fear of mixing with them. During the focus groups these participants often expressed sincere interest and even empathy toward their immigrant classmates, especially when these immigrant pupils were telling the stories of their arrival in Italy and of their previous hard life in their countries of origin. Here is an example:

“[...] *the immigrant girls in our class...well, everything went quite well. We have never had problems, they have always been open. There has never been a barrier because she was Romanian and we were Italian.*” The same girl a few minutes before had said, in front of an imaginary audience of immigrants, “*Get back to your bloody country!*” and “*A curse on those that made you come here!*”.

In the same focus group a girl who had listened with interest to an immigrant girl in her class telling the story of her life in her native country, of her adventurous journey to Italy and of her present life, later on gave vent to her rage over the arrival of new immigrants. In another focus group a girl clearly underlined this contradiction and, in sum, pointed out that when the immigrant – in her case a Romanian – is a friend, someone you know, who is in your class or in your school, there is no problem. Instead, when you meet a Romanian in the street, things are different. You are afraid and hostile.

These examples show that at school level or, at least, at class level, positive cross-cultural contact has been created and social cohesion has been built. This also means that in their work teachers should always provide concrete examples of social cohesion both in the class and in the school and, what is more, should try to enable their students to become aware of their contradictory views when dealing with the problem of immigrants in general and when dealing with the problem of their specific immigrant classmates.

Some suggestions for educational interventions at school

In previous papers (e.g., Pagani, 2001; Pagani & Robustelli, 2010) I underlined the importance of a personal approach to the development of empathy (Batson, Polycarpou, Harmon-Jones, Imhoff, Mitchener, Bednar, Klein, & Highberger, 1997) in cross-cultural relations. In particular, within this context I underlined the role of literature, as well as of other kinds of artistic expression. For example, in a literary work deep emotions and thoughts can be evoked, elaborated and expressed. This way readers are allowed to share other people's most profound experiences, even when they pertain to other times and other places.

In this paper I maintain that in periods of great social disintegration, which almost ceaselessly have characterized the history of mankind, art can help create that cohesion which otherwise could not be realized. Through art, in innumerable varieties of ways, human beings have been able to share basic, essential, intense, and extreme mental states. This fact has certainly contributed in many cases and for a number of people, even for those belonging to different groups, to developing a common ingroup identity (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000; 2009), which includes the ingroup and former outgroup members in one superordinate category. In my view, getting into contact with others' emotions and thoughts through art can be considered a kind of "extended" or "imagined" contact (e.g., Cameron, Rutland, Brown, & Douch, 2006; Crisp, Stathi, Turner, & Husnu, 2009) if we attach a broader meaning to these two terms.

A kind of artistic expression that has recently been analyzed in its connection with intergroup relations is music. A special issue of *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations* was devoted to "providing a coherent, culturally-diverse set of contributions exploring the roles of music in intergroup dynamics" (Giles, Hajda, & Hamilton, 2009, p. 290).

I maintain that music can be an excellent tool for improving outgroup attitudes in cross-cultural relations in many social contexts, and especially in schools. And this, in brief, above all for two reasons.

In addition to its intrinsic special qualities, with its structure music proposes some aspects of the culture it belongs to, thus helping understand this culture. In fact, though music certainly expresses deep universal experiences, its different forms are usually developed and moulded also by cultural factors. For example, ethnomusicology has allowed many of us to come into contact with a reality, which rarely surfaces and which is particularly rich, complex, and multifaceted, where music, history, sociology, and psychology are strictly intermingled. Thus, through positive experiences of music pertaining to different cultures, these cultures can be better understood and appreciated. For

example, Rodríguez-Bailón, Ruis and Moya (2009) demonstrated that when activating a positive side of the stereotype (in this case Flamenco music) of a traditionally prejudiced group (Gypsies), participants' implicit attitudes toward that group improved.

In schools this can be achieved simply by listening to musical pieces from different cultures or, probably even better, by directly participating in various ways, either with the use of voice or of different musical instruments, to the performing of music itself. Pupils from different cultures can thus experience new kinds of diversities and complexities, which certainly fosters the development of more mature personalities, enriched as they are by a larger number of social identities (Giles, Denes, Hamilton, & Hajda, 2009).

But also the experience of music *per se*, apart from its cultural connotations, can be useful for improving intergroup relations. Through music, as well as through other kinds of artistic expression, individuals can undergo an experience that does not very frequently occur in humans' lives, namely an experience of universality. In fact, some authors maintain that human communication is musical and that human beings communicate through a rhythm, which means that human communication is characterized by specific rhythmic patterns (Aldridge, 1989; Giles, Denes, Hamilton, & Hajda, 2009). Through the experience of music people from all cultures can more easily and more deeply become aware of a superordinate identity they belong to, which is constituted by their common fate as human beings and by the common core of their psyche, which includes such universal feelings as hope, love, hate, suffering, fear, regret, and peacefulness, while at the same time preserving the awareness of the salience of their specific (e.g., cultural, psychological, etc.) subgroup identity. We all remember how during World War II the famous German song "Lili Marleen" was sung by soldiers from the armies of both fronts, as Stanley Kramer showed in 1961 in his famous film "Judgment at Nuremberg".

Obviously, educational interventions like the ones I have just suggested can be successful only on condition that teachers are well knowledgeable and aware of the main research findings in social psychology and cognitive psychology studies regarding interpersonal relations and the role of music in these relations. This way they can become particularly capable of creating and implementing more effective educational interventions aiming to improve cross-cultural relations in their schools and in the outside world. Competent and sensitive teachers are generally adept at coping with this challenging task.

Notes

¹ In Italian schools immigrant pupils are enrolled in mainstream classes.

² In the years 2000-2011 more than 1.700 convicts died in Italian jails. One third of them committed suicide (<http://www.ristretti.it/areestudio/disagio/ricerca/2010/index.htm>).

³ This comment immediately followed the previous one, made by another participant.

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